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ABSTRACT

In a period of expanding enrollments and shrinking budgets, this article criticizes the curriculum design of college English programs and current teaching practices. The author feels that fragmentation of the curriculum into highly specialized areas of study has prevented the development of new courses in interdisciplinary studies, film criticism, modern letters, and rhetoric and stylistics. Resultant practices in teaching and teacher recruitment are examined with alternative solutions offered to the interrelated problems involved in teaching and curriculum design. (RL)

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A STUDENT-CENTERED ENGLISH CURRICULUM

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
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What a Department of English buys primarily with its funds are curriculum and teaching. The checks may go to the faculty, to chair and desk manufacturers, to the Bell Telephone Company, to University Stores, to the U.S. Post Office, to secretaries and assistants, and even to air lines and florists, but eventually what we get are curriculum and teaching. So the fundamental question is: are we getting our money's worth in curriculum and teaching?

My answer is a glum no. With the best of intentions we have invested in a curriculum that threatens to destroy our subject matter and in teaching that is sadly beneath our potential. An unfriendly critic might say that we have been feckless, perverse, or simply addle-pated. A more friendly view would be that we have been so beguiled by rising enrollments, higher salaries, expanding programs, and federal and foundation grants that we have naively come to assume that we must be doing things right. It is the old theory of the later Calvinists that material reward must be the sign of inner virute.

In any event, whatever has lulled us into complacency is passing. The world grows unfriendly. Anti-intellectuals are in the saddle in Washington. State legislatures at best are cautious, at worst hostile. Trustees of private institutions are bearish; funds from the federal government and from foundations are drying up. We are facing, in short, a time of austerity such as a whole generation of college and university faculties has not known. Ironically, however, this austerity may save us, for it may force us to face up to the consequences of our well meaning but fat-headed irresponsibility. Unless something causes us to face up to these consequences, English as we have known it,

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I profoundly believe, will not long endure.

Let me turn first, then, to the plight of our curriculum. As a profession we have possessed an unholy obsession with courses. This obsession has nurtured the conviction that everything a student should learn, or even wishes to learn, should be covered by a course. In the 1930's we began to develop courses that covered every conceivable aspect of English and American literature from, as the cliché has it, Beowulf to Virginia Woolf. Subsequently, each new school of literary criticism brought its own clutch of courses, and so did such programs as linguistics, comparative literature, American studies, and creative writing. More recently we have been adding courses in contemporary literature, folklore, bibliographical analysis, and black literature. And the end is nowhere near in sight. Note that courses always get added, almost never dropped or telescoped or enlarged.

We need not go into the causes for this passion for courses, but there are at least two results that deserve attention.

The first is that we have come to assume that a course is the elixer that will cure every academic pain. Does an undergraduate show signs of impatience with his program? Change his courses. Is a graduate student not reading widely enough for his preliminaries? Put him into more courses. Is Professor Bigapple flirting with a job at another institution? Give him the courses he wants. Is the program in linguistics not attracting enough students? Add more courses. Are the blacks restive about the curriculum? Add still more courses. Even Lydia Pinkham never had such an all-purpose remedy as we have developed. But like all elixers, ours simply masks the symptoms and does not get at the illness itself.

An even more serious result of this obsession with courses is that

it threatens to destroy our subject matter by chopping it up into so many fragments that the whole is no longer comprehensible, may not even be recognizable. As our curriculum now exists, to be painfully blunt, a typical course in English offers the student nothing but a small, artificial, almost discrete division of literary study wrenched out of context and hence devoid of its profoundest meanings. With all the good will and good nature in the world we are simply further fracturing the minds, if not the lives, of our students instead of providing a force for integration.

Fortunately, it seems to me, we are going to be compelled finally by economic circumstance to deal realistically with this vast proliferation of courses that we have allowed to come to pass. Already most of us are being told to cut down on our hiring. And if we cannot add more men, it follows that we cannot add more courses in the old, easy way. Yet the demand for new courses persists, presently in such fields as inter-disciplinary studies, film criticism, modern letters, and rhetoric and stylistics. So, what do we do?

If we wish, we can still add more courses but only through means that many will find painful. We can eliminate some older courses, telescope others, offer others only every other year. We can gain maneuvering room by insisting that no course be "owned" any longer by a senior professor, that no area be entitled any longer to a minimum number of courses each semester, that no senior staff member be permitted to confine himself to graduate courses, that freshman composition ~~can~~ be cut down or cut out. In short, there are still ways open to most departments, even in a tight money period, to respond to the demand for new courses.

But these methods do not touch the basic illness which is fragmentation.

They simply substitute bright new fragments for older ones that have lost their lustre. What really needs to be done to protect our investment in English is to reverse the whole process of fragmentation and start working toward integration. What specifically can we do?

First, it seems to me, we can agree that our fundamental concern in establishing a curriculum is students and not subject matter. It may well be that we should completely reverse the current tendency to give the undergraduates the courses with the broadest range and the doctoral candidates the courses with the narrowest range. It might well be better for the students to offer the undergraduates courses in a limited number of representative works to be explained in their own terms and in the context of the students' personal experience. Then the beginning graduate students might appropriately be offered courses in which the literary works are studied in the broader context of literary history, and the advanced graduate students courses in which the works are viewed in still broader aesthetic, cultural, and philosophical contexts. In any event, the starting point for working out a year's curriculum should not be last year's catalogue but next year's students.

Second, we can acknowledge that the curriculum appropriately contains much more than courses. We need to include in it all kinds of out-of-course experiences such as special projects, independent reading, conversations with writers, and anything else that enables the student to become self-motivated and self-taught.

Third, we can change the nature of many of our courses so that they can be accommodated to the study of literature in larger and more meaningful contexts: cultural, aesthetic, philosophical, or whatever is most appropriate. Personally I would almost eliminate the two-and-three-hour

courses that serve up nothing but snippets of subject-matter, and move to six-hour, nine-hour and twelve-hour courses in which the student can immerse himself in a more natural segment of literary or language study. As a start, why shouldn't the Romantic Movement, British and American be studied in one course? Or Shakespearian and non-Shakespearian dramatic literature of the Renaissance? Or all of Renaissance literature for that matter? Or American literature and language of the twentieth century? Or, to go further afield, why shouldn't English and Philosophy team up on a nine-hour course on the literature and philosophy of existentialism? Or English and art on a six-hour course on surrealism? or English and the theater on the modern drama? or English and sociology on the literature of revolt? Our best course at Iowa right now is a twelve-hour undergraduate course in English literature from Shakespear to 1900. The universal testimony of students taking it is that it makes other courses seem trivial by comparison. It would revitalize our work in English enormously, it seems to me, if departments offered only a half or a third the number of courses they do now, but have the remaining courses deal with literary works in broad contexts. A student then would register for only one or two a term.

But no curriculum can be effective unless the teaching makes it so. Thus I come to my second point, which is that we have not gotten enough from our investment in teaching. In saying this I do not indict a whole profession for incompetence. Far from it. There is excellent teaching taking place in many of our classes. What I am contending, however, is that we have not gone far enough in creating conditions that encourage the best teaching.

For example, even in a period of relative prosperity we have

allowed the class sizes to grow to the point where in many classes there is little personal contact between professor and student. We have not been imaginative enough in the use of records, films, and other visual and audio aids. We have made teaching seem almost negligible in our esteem by granting the largest raises to those with the longest bibliographies. Indeed there was a time, maybe it is not yet past, when the man we most honored was the one who managed to be off campus the oftenest. Furthermore, we have subtly discouraged lively teaching by making it clear to one and all that in recruiting we seek gap-fillers and not men of far-flung interests and imaginations. Listen to the recruiting teams up and down the halls of this hotel. What they are looking for are specialists to fill the gaps in their department. Knowing this, candidates present themselves as gap-fillers. And graduate departments wanting their Ph.D.'s to be well placed, train them as gap fillers. Thus a man is trained to fill someone's gap in the Renaissance, or a still narrower one in Milton, and I don't doubt but that someone is being trained to fill a narrower gap yet calling for a specialist in the late Milton. Once hired, the new man who is smart, accepts his role as gap-filler and intensifies his concentration. You think I jest? Just a month ago a respected department you all know told a fine young teacher whom they had hired as a specialist in the eighteenth century that he would not be kept on because he had developed too great an interest in film criticism. They added they were dropping him for the sake of economy. I doubt that. I suspect that they have a recruiting team at this very moment in this hotel looking for a gap filler who won't let his mind and his imagination spill outside the bounds of the eighteenth century. As much as anything else, I should like to submit, this insidious

disease of gapitis is what prevents our teaching from being the wide-ranging and exalting thing it should be.

In relatively good times we have not invested in teaching as we should have. Now, as the boom gets lowered on the budget, our potential for good teaching is likely to become even less well realized. There will be pressures to increase class size even further, to increase class loads in some schools, to increase non-class loads in almost all schools. (By non-class loads I mean the direction of theses, special projects, reading courses, honors programs, and the like.) Leaves of absence will probably decline in number, and salary raises for excellence in teaching become even rarer than they have been. It is not a happy prospect for us or for our students.

Yet I think the temper of the present day is such that the country will not continue to support us even at the present level unless we make our teaching more vital. Let me suggest just three means for breathing more life into our teaching.

First, we can recognize excellence in teaching far more than we have in awarding raises and promotions. Not that I want to discourage research, but in a time when money is scarce I think it very poor tactics indeed to allow the impression to persist that we reward only research. We have worried a bit over the "publish or perish" policies in some departments. Maybe we better start worrying about "publish and perish" for the profession as a whole.

Second, recruiting teams can give their highest priority to imagination and breadth of intelligence, not to a candidate's special field. In doing so they will not only be benefiting their own departments but indirectly causing a change for the better in graduate education.

Third, we can explode the curriculum as I suggested above.

This should result in higher quality teaching if for no other reason than that it will invalidate all those old dog-eared lecture notes. Broad six-hour and nine-hour courses call for team teaching, and nothing jerks a teacher to attention so quickly as being before a class in the presence of one of his colleagues. Furthermore, the dialogue between two or more faculty members inevitably pulls in the students too. The twelve-hour course at Iowa I mentioned before is limited to thirty students per class, and is team-taught by three faculty members. We assign each new assistant professor to one of these classes with one or two of the senior faculty; it is a natural way of involving the senior faculty in the teaching of their junior colleagues, and is the best way of discovering how effective a teacher the new man is. By comparison class visitation and student reports are pale inadequacies. But what I want to stress here is that I have rarely seen such commitment and intellectual excitment as this course demonstrates. The faculty teach better than ordinarily, and the students are correspondingly better motivated.

Your immediate question, I know, will be how such a procedure can be introduced without additional funds because it is obviously a more expensive method of teaching than the customary one. All I can say is that it results in such effective education that it is worth cutting corners for, even large corners.

In summary, let me repeat my major argument. In the period of expanding enrollments and budgets just past, we have allowed a curriculum to develop that is fragmenting our subject matter almost beyond recognition, and we have not given the appropriate encouragement to excellence in teaching. Now, in a period of austerity we shall have to do better if we expect society to continue to invest in us. But I would not put it just in terms of economics, despite the subject of this meeting. In many

ways we have offered our students much. But for their sake and for the sake of our own peace of mind, we need to offer them more.